

# **The Main Principles of Democratic Confederalism**

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Democratic Confederalism, as defined by Abdullah Öcalan is the ethical, political, and administrative expression of society – as a historical and sociological structure – in which different identities, factions and groups coexist in dialectical harmony. By this we are not referring to a classical confederal structure consisting of states, but the confederal unity of societal structures. The fundamental difference between the two are that one relies on the state and the other on society.

When we approach this subject from a historical perspective we can see that state-based capitalist modernity and society-based democratic modernity are locked in a perpetual conflict. While capitalist modernity grounds itself on maximum profit, industrialism and the nation-state, democratic modernity grounds itself on democratic society, democratic confederalism and eco-industry.

*“Democratic modernity replies to the universalist, linear progressivist and determinist methodology deployed by the modern nation-state to achieve the homogenisation and herdification of society with a pluralist and probabilistic methodology that enables the visibility of democratic society. It develops its alternative through its openness to different political formations, its multiculturalism, its anti-monopolist stance, its ecological and feminist attributes and its economic structure that is grounded on satisfying society’s fundamental needs and societal disposition. As opposed to capitalist modernity’s nation-state, Democratic Confederalism is democratic modernity’s political alternative.*

*Democratic modernity is flexible in its approach to the nation. This in itself plays a significant role in solving so many societal problems by bringing together the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-faith and multi-political segments of society as opposed to the singular approach of nations based on a single language, ethnicity, religion or state. The multi-dimensional approach of democratic modernity to the nation will form a strong foundation for the much needed establishment of peace and fraternity in the Middle East.”*

(Abdullah Öcalan)

Social scientists have developed different definitions of society. However, a common theme in many of these definitions is that society is not merely the summation of humans but a more complex organism that transcends this mere summation. From its first organized version, the clan, to its most intricate form, the nation, society has always come together in a joint life and ambitions. The nation form is a very complex and developed version of society.

## **The State and Democracy**

It is at this stage where the concepts of state and democracy take on a specific significance. Both concepts have a historical background. While the state is said to be around five-thousand years old, democracy is as old as society itself. In this regard, a deep evaluation of these two concepts is imperative in the understanding of democratic confederalism; itself an ambitious project for the organisation of life and its administration.

It goes without saying that concepts, theories and institutions have original states and metamorphosed versions. In our day, state and democracy are two concepts that have been most

affected by this metamorphosis. It must be stated, however, that these concepts, contrary to popular belief and manipulation, are not identical or interchangeable phenomena; rather, they represent opposite poles. For thousands of years the state – an institution in most need of re-evaluation – has been presented as fate for societies and humanity in general. From experienced politicians to even respected artists, many people would not dare to question the existence or the legitimacy of the state. Those that do question the state are widely slammed as “anarchists”, as though this were an insult. The very same people tend to present democracy as a characteristic or a constituent component of the state. In fact, the state is the first institution to institutionalise hierarchy and the class system. In time, the state has evolved into the organised version of violence and force and has portrayed this onto society through ideological, military and political structures. While its form, shape and structures have changed over time, to say that its essence has been preserved will not be an exaggeration. Even if it masks itself through different forms, the state is essentially an institution against society and democracy. In order to hide this essence, the state has not refrained from utilising the justice system, politics, culture and arts and faiths and religions in the quest to legitimise itself. To summarise, the organisation we call ‘the state’ has always been a force for the suffocation of societal space and its freedom and today has become a mass organisation of power.

In other words, a five-thousand-year-old organisation called ‘the state’ has engulfed society, that which is hundreds of thousands of years old. The naturally organised lifestyle of society (democracy) has been limited by the state, almost to the brink of extinction. It could be said that the struggle between society and the state or between the state and democracy has been culminating for thousands of years. While the state aims to widen its scope of sovereignty, society struggles to preserve its existence.

If a substantial definition of democracy is to be made, then we can say that democracy is society’s ability to form its own life and administration, and to establish the institutions in order to maintain and develop its existence. In this regard, the history of democracy goes much further back than the institutionalisation of the state. Society made a huge leap forward in productivity with the Neolithic Revolution in the Fertile Crescent and in time, achieved an amazing organisation of life with developments in politics, economics, art, faith, agriculture and other fields. It is even possible to define democracy as the summation of values constructed on this rich inheritance. Positivist and liberal approaches tend to overlook the dialectics of society-democracy and deploy a methodology that takes state civilisation as a beginning. This approach overlooks thousands of years of societal labour and democratic accumulation. This approach cannot be legitimised as ‘scientific’, and is also ethically and politically problematic. This methodology also does nothing to help the solution of the problem between the state and democracy, in other words, the state and society. To look for the solution of the current “Third World War” being fought out in the Middle East in this fundamental and historical conflict will be a methodologically logical place to start. This is because the region in which the current crisis is primarily being fought out is also the region that has lived through this conflict for thousands of years. Is it possible to deem it a coincidence that the first site of societal life and production is now the most crisis ridden geography in the world? If it is not, then how did it come to be? It will be beneficial to look for the answer to this question in the intensification of the historical conflict between the state and society in the Middle East. Alongside this, the external interventions of the past two-hundred years and imperialistic policies have added to the problem. The exploitative role of Europe based capitalist modernity is decisive. In order to understand the historical depth of

the current situation, it is not enough to analyse religious fundamentalism – the battering ram of capitalist modernity. Societal destruction, massacre, immigration and daily tragedies are now not just at the door, but breaking down the doors of European civilisation. This situation clearly shows that Europe isn't as insulated from global developments as it previously thought.

The question of 'what to do?' is a burning question. State-sourced fascism and fanaticism is now threatening everyone and everything from the most powerful power-holders to the people on the streets which is forcing everyone to look for an urgent solution to this question.

## **The Radical Democratic Solution**

The treatment should start with where the illness is. Humanity should be found where it was lost. History shows us that without peace in Mesopotamia it will be difficult for other regions to live in peace. The biggest wars in history have been fought in or fought over this region. Because the harmony of humanity was destabilised here. Until this region is not reunited with a wholly democratic administration sanitised of manipulative power games, the problems of the region cannot be solved. This is the radical democracy solution. Radical democracy is the paradigmatic approach that foresees society as the fundamental dynamic of any solution and removes the state as an organised institution of suppression. As democracy is institutionalised, the state will wither away. As society organises itself and institutionalises its democratic will, the manipulations of the state will become apparent. This is most true of the nation-state and the virtual reality it has maintained. The state's role in caging society and exploiting it on a daily basis will be better understood. The understanding of this reality will open the path to radical democracy and democratic confederalism as its embodiment.

The imprisoned Kurdish leader and thinker, Abdullah Öcalan, highlights this in his defences to the European Court of Human rights: *"In these conditions, the power of solution of radical democracy and democratic confederalism is becoming clearer. Kurdistan, as the cradle of civilisation, is now the cradle for the dawn of democratic confederalism, of a real and radical democracy. There is a law of nature: Everything is reborn on its own routes. It seems like democracy will be reborn on its hidden routes in the Neolithic Revolution. It seems possible that the region that is still the recipient of many attacks from central civilisation will be the bearer of baby democracy. These lands and mountains, that have long lost the ability to administer themselves and their ability to be ethical and political societies may be the scene of a new rising by the 'Kurtis'."*

## **Democratic Confederalism as the Primary Political Solution**

Democratic confederalism is the primary solution to the historical and societal problems that capitalist modernity has deepened. In this regard, it foresees a paradigmatic reconstruction of every sphere of societal life. Its fundamental unit of the reorganisation of societal life is the democratic nation. The nation is primarily a unity of mentality. The nation-state establishes itself through nationalistic constructs. It also deploys sexism, religion and scientism in its systemic construction. It constructs ideological formations around the singularisation of language, culture, history and the market. By doing so, forms a virtual reality in which the nation and the individual becomes the servant of the state. At the same time creating a virtually played out democratic stage. All of these serve to deepen societal crises rather than solve them. It is enough for one

to take a look at the practices of the nation-state in the past two centuries to understand these truths. At the current historical juncture, it is clear that the nation-state does not present us with a viable model for the solution of societal crises. The democratic nation is the sole solution in the face of these problems. The democratic nation, which organises society and individuals with a democratic consciousness, also brings together local and universal culture. History shows that this kind of society has existed in different times and spaces. As long as forces of power do not meddle with the internal dynamics and natural harmony of a society, it will always evolve into a platform for democratic unity.

Abdullah Öcalan highlights this aspect of the subject as follows:

“Democratic confederalism has the potential to transcend the negativities that arise from the nation-state system. It is also an effective tool for the politicisation of society. It is simple and easily applicable. Every community, ethnicity, culture, religious group, intellectual movement, economic unit can autonomously organise itself and express itself as a political entity. This is how autonomy should be understood. Every entity has the right to organise itself from the local to the universal. Every entity or federative unit has the right to apply direct democracy to its structure. This is where all its power derives from. Just as the nation-state is the denial of direct democracy, democratic confederalism is the pinnacle of direct democracy.”

Within this context we can take a closer look at the specifics of democratic confederalism:

### **Political and Ethical Society**

Politics, although its original meaning has been severely manipulated, is essentially the act of imaginatively planning the vital works of society. Ethics can be defined as the formulation of societal principles and standards in carrying out the above mentioned activities. As it can be seen, one is based on the material and the other is based on the immaterial aspects of life. These two concepts are existentially significant for society. Ethically void societies are prone to destruction, while politically insufficient societies are unsustainable. Both bring about societal annihilation. In this regard, society is naturally political and ethical.

### **Democratic Politics and Self-administration**

Society is a live organism, it is historical and multi-faceted. It is therefore natural for society to behold a variety of political tendencies and preferences. Democratic confederalism allows for these differing tendencies to exist harmoniously within a radical democratic framework without turning them into occasions for conflict and violence. If society's natural harmony and internal dynamics is not manipulated by an external, suppressive elite then all types of problems can be solved through discussion in a peaceful atmosphere. If this is the case, then all ethnic, religious, cultural, social and gender groups can coexist amongst local and central political institutions embedded with the principles of democratic politics. There can be no societal problem that cannot be solved in a radical democratic society with direct democracy through local assemblies. This is a society in which free individuals and communities are able to freely govern themselves without the suppressive, hegemonic, manipulative pressures from an elite institution. In essence, unity in diversity and diversity in unity is not a utopia, but rather a societal reality.

## **Economic Autonomy**

Throughout history, all hegemonic elites have utilised the economy as a means to control and a enslave society. Especially in our time, a time in which capitalist modernity has entered its finance capital era, this has peaked. Economic colonialism is the most dangerous form of exploitation for a society. A society that is incapable of governing its own economic riches, means of production and economic activity will always be under the control of those that do govern these aspects of its existence. Economic dependence means political dependence. This then means colonisation. This kind of society, along with its country, is vulnerable to all sorts of looting. All of its underground and over-ground resources are open for pillaging. In this regard, the nation-state is capitalism's tool for profit.

In democratic confederal system, an economy based on profit, corruption and commodification cannot exist. A communal economy grounded on a use value based on societal need will be constructed. This is the autonomous version of a societal economy. We can refer back to Abdullah Öcalan on this point:

“Economic autonomy is neither based on private capitalism or state capitalism. It is based on an ecological industry and communal economy that is essentially democracy implemented in the economy. The limits placed on industry, development, technology, business and property are the boundaries of being an ecological and democratic society. The economy is not a field in which profiteering and capital accumulation is allowed to operate. Economic autonomy is a model in which profiteering and capital accumulation is brought down to a minimum. While not dogmatically rejecting the market, trade, product variety and competition, it does reject the sovereignty of capital accumulation. The financial system is acceptable up to the point it serves economic productivity. It deems the practice of making money from money as the most effortless form of exploitation and denies the possibility for this outright.”

## **Social and Cultural Life**

In the society created by the nation-state, social and cultural life has been dealt a debilitating blow. Urban structures where millions have flocked to are centres of societal cancer where unemployment, social inequality, internal conflict and violence has hit dangerous heights. The nation-state has deemed the city as the centre for profit, capital and industry and in these centres societal values, culture and the individual are being consumed on a daily basis. Society's cultural values and its history are being commodified and the individual is being turned into a fanatic follower of popular culture. Women are being subjected to this on a disproportionate scale. The nation-state has placed the woman at the bottom of the pile in its “human factory”. It is specifically doing this by dismembering the woman's body and presenting it as a marketable commodity.

Education and health have been turned into an area for material and immaterial exploitation. While the health of humanity has been handed over to the machinery of profit, the education system is being used to form the most anti-social human beings. Essentially, society and the individual are being dragged into the swamp of nationalism, religious fundamentalism, sexism and scientism.

The democratic nation concept of democratic confederalism aims to revitalise the values of humanity by reintroducing society to its local and universal values. The reconfiguration of mentality and the spirit signifies a re-socialisation of humanity. Education has to once again be a tool for furthering the dialectical relationship between the individual and society. In this regard, the democratic nation signifies society's return to its own reality.

## **The Women's Liberation Ideology**

When one takes a look at the nation-state system, it is easily noticeable that starting from the family and moving onto every sphere of societal life the woman has been turned into an anti-social object void of any discernible freewill. This situation in turn has engulfed the whole of society. Without solving this most historical problem first, it is abundantly clear that none of society's problems will be solved.

The democratic nation approaches this problem in a fundamental and radical way, and thus implements the principle of "if women aren't free, society cannot be free" in its quest for a solution. The democratic nation system is a system in which promotes the organisation of women through autonomous institutions. Women, as the oldest and deepest exploited segment of society, are the fundamental constructors of the democratic nation.

## **Self-defence**

Self-defence is a natural state. All living organisms have a self-defence mechanism. In humans this defence is both biological and societal. Those individuals and communities devoid of the societal version of self-defence are doomed. Even if they were able to survive, it could only ever be as slaves. In the animate world, only humans develop systems of oppression both internally within their species and externally over other living organisms. In this regard, self-defence is definitely societal and a self-defence system within this framework must be established.

Within this context, the organisation of the self-defence of local communities in the democratic nation is a natural and societal right. Therefore, while developing the organisation of communes and local assemblies, the self-defence aspect must also be constructed.

In our day, and throughout history, the Kurds have been a community most in need of self-defence. This is because the Kurds and their regions have always been subjected to physical, societal and cultural attacks. A people that has for so long been subjected to existential attacks must develop its own form of self-defence. Self-defence, along with its military form, must be developed in every sphere of society.

## **Democratic Law**

The law has become capitalist modernity's most utilised tool. It needs this tool to the profit and capitalist system it has constructed. The law is the system's armour and tool for legitimisation. This is why the legal system of the nation-state is prepared very carefully to the tiniest detail. The main concern here is not societal, but for the benefit of the state. This is due to the fact that the nation-state is constantly intervening in societal affairs. In order to give this intervention a legitimacy, the legal and political systems are fully utilised.

As opposed to this, the legal system of the democratic-nation is based on plurality and purity. It does not require detailed formulations. This is because it essentialises the ethical characteristic

of historical society. In any case, there is no need for a written legal system if societal ethics is functioning. A free society solves its problems through its historically ethical character.

## **The Diplomacy of the Democratic Nation**

Diplomacy is the totality of peaceful relations within the international domain, grounded on mutual respect. Democratic societies regard diplomacy as a domain for the furthering of peaceful and respectful relations. Possible problems are aimed to be solved within this domain.

Diplomacy between nation-states is more a tool for the pursuing of maximum profit through ritualised relations at times of peace and war. If, for these states, peaceful relations do not serve the maximum potential for profit at any given time, war will be fought. In nation-state diplomacy, society's thoughts on any given issue are not significant. Even a quick look at the wars of the 20th century is enough to prove this point.

In the democratic confederal system, the diplomacy of the democratic nation is grounded on societal values. It is peaceful and libertarian. War is rejected only except for times of self-defence. All diplomatic efforts are concentrated on avoiding violence and conflict.

On diplomacy, Öcalan says:

“In the democratic nation, diplomacy is transformed into a domain in which peace and solidarity is furthered between societies, imaginative means of exchange are developed and the solution of possible problems are pursued. The diplomacy of the democratic nation is a tool for peace, not for war. It is a mission full of ethical and political values and carried out by wise people. It specifically plays an important role for neighbouring peoples in developing friendly relations for mutual benefit. It is the constructive force behind creating higher societal syntheses between communities.

In our day, the Kurdish people are in serious need of a diplomacy between them and their neighbouring peoples and on a global scale. There is a significant role for diplomacy in ensuring and maintaining their existence. In the near past, specifically during capitalist modernity, the Kurdish people have been the people to lose out the most in diplomatic negotiations. This is most true of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially during World War One and Two. The Kurds have faced tragic events like genocide and massacre.”

## **Democratic Autonomy as the Embodiment of Democratic Confederalism**

Democratic confederalism as a system constructs and organises itself through democratic autonomy. All units within the confederal structure organise themselves autonomously. These structures can be people's assemblies, cooperatives or academies. The fundamental unit of these structures is the commune. Within this context, the fundamental institutions in implementing a radical and direct democracy are the people's assemblies and people's congresses. In the aim of solving society's economic problems and providing for society's needs, the cooperative structures are imperative. Education is the main sphere of societal consciousness. Societal enlightenment will ensure the proper implementation and maintenance of the system. It is important to reach all parts of society through the establishment of popular academies.

“The second dimension of becoming a democratic nation is the reorganisation of society’s physical existence. Democratic autonomy is the essence of this existence. In the general sense, democratic autonomy signifies the democratic nation. The democratic nation can be defined using more general concepts. It has cultural, economic, social, legal, diplomatic and other dimensions. In the specific sense, democratic autonomy is the political dimension, in other words, it signifies democratic authority or administration.” (Abdullah Öcalan)

We can take a closer look at the dimensions of democratic autonomy:

The commune is the fundamental unit of democratic autonomy. Without communes, assemblies cannot be formed. In this regard, the commune is the smallest organised structure within society. In the democratic system, no citizen should be without a commune. Everyone must be a part of at least one commune. The commune, then, is the fundamental structure for democratic autonomy in which free individuals come together to discuss every aspect of life, take decisions and plan the necessary action. The commune can be organised in all villages and towns. Without the construction of village and street communes, neighbourhood and city assemblies cannot be formed.

The assemblies are the self-administration structures formed by free individuals. For example, a neighbourhood assembly is formed of representatives from all street communes within a specific neighbourhood. If a neighbourhood has twelve streets, then twelve communes will be represented in that neighbourhood assembly. The communes will be represented proportionately. Some communes may have two, some may have four representatives. Gender representation must be equal. The neighbourhood assembly forms commissions in response to the needs of the neighbourhood. In the general sense, these assemblies are the domains for the political, economic, social and ecological organisation of all ethnic, faith, gender, profession and cultural groups within society. In the democratic confederal system assemblies are organised at the neighbourhood, city and regional levels.

**The principles of democratic autonomy in communes and assemblies can be listed as follows:**

1. Discussions, decision making and the implementation of decisions should be carried out with the people.
2. Equal representation (gender, youth, minorities etc.) must be implemented.
3. Co-spokespersons should be implemented in all commissions and committees.
4. Women’s communes and assemblies must be formed in all localities.
5. Youth communes and assemblies must be formed in all localities.
6. All institutions of the democratic confederal system must implement the principles of democratic autonomy.
7. All communes and assemblies must develop their autonomy and self-defence.

Öcalan identifies the functioning of the system as follows:

“It is important to understand that even a village or neighbourhood will need confederal unities. Every village or neighbourhood can easily be a confederal union. For example, in a village the ecological unit, women’s unit, self-defence unit, youth unit, education unit, folklore unit, health unit, cooperation unit and economy unit need to form some sort of unity. The unity of these units could easily be declared a confederal structure. When we implement the same system at a local, regional, national and global level, we can see that the democratic confederal system is a comprehensive system.”

### **Rojava as an example of Democratic Confederalism-Democratic Nation**

Since 2012, a revolutionary process has been under way in Rojava Kurdistan. The experiences of this revolution have been historical and deserve a closer look.

Nation-statist fascism and the organisation formed out of the chaos created by it, ISIS, have turned Syria into a blood-bath. Since 2011, almost half a million people have lost their lives as a result of the violence. Millions have been displaced. The country has been destroyed and the conflict is ongoing. Rojava, in the north of Syria, has been an example for humanity amongst the chaos that is Syria. Rojava gave the whole world a message when it was able to organise its self-defence and won important victories against the inhumane gangs that are active in the region. This message is one that shows that even in amongst a bloody war, peoples and communities can co-exist in a democratic nation system where freedom, equality and justice are sovereign.

Despite the best efforts of the Turkish and Syrian states, among others, in the Cizire, Kobani and Afrin cantons of Rojava, Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Turcomans; Muslims, Christians, Alavites, Yazidis and all other ethnic and religious groups are trying to form a joint democratic system. As of now, in all the cantons of Rojava, communes, assemblies and cooperatives are being formed. Even in the town of Kobani, where ISIS was defeated in front of the whole world’s eyes, these works are being undertaken. Of course it is not possible to say that all the institutions are already working in complete accordance with the principles of democratic confederalism. It would be unrealistic to expect that this could be the case so soon under the current circumstances. One must not be in the expectancy that the institutions and mentalities constructed by the nation-state over a long period of time can be dismantled so quickly.

This revolution is bringing about meaningful and historical change despite being subjected to intensive attacks and a severe embargo. Rojava is presenting the Middle East with an example of a democratic nation embodied in democratic confederalism, where societal problems are being solved through the establishment of communes, assemblies and congresses. Rojava is a humanitarian value, and is expecting the support and solidarity of the democratic and progressive peoples of the world.

Alongside Rojava, democratic confederalism and self-administration is being developed in the northern part of Kurdistan. The Turkish state, however, has chosen to militarily suppress this peaceful and civilian initiative with the application of state terror. Recently in the towns of Cizre, Silopi, İdil, Şırnak, Nusaybin, Derik, Kerboran, Silvan, Sur and Varto the Turkish state undertook civilian massacres to suppress the self-administration initiatives. However, despite the genocidal attempts of the Turkish state, the democratic confederal structure has developed to a significant level in the north of Kurdistan too.

## Conclusion

For humanity, societal work has always been a deep-rooted responsibility. The quest for the development of society has always been exciting and intense. In this regard, societal work is relevant to the historical realities of humanity. Therefore, other than being a philosophical, political, ethical, cultural and social paradigm, democratic confederalism is also a proposal for a solution to the humanitarian crises of our time.

Lastly, this is how Abdullah Öcalan declares his thoughts, emotions and excitement on democratic confederalism as the embodiment of the democratic, ecological and women's liberationist paradigm:

“For example, if it were me, from the outskirts of Mount Cûdî and Mount Cilo, on the edges of Lake Van, around the mountains of Agri, Munzur and Bingöl, along the banks of the Euphrates, Tigris and Zap, through the plains of Urfa, Mus and Iğdir, wherever I may be, like I've just disembarked Noah's Ark after the great tempest, running away from the Nimrods like Abraham, from the Pharaohs like Moses, from the Roman Empires like Jesus and from ignorance like Mohammed, inspired by the passion of Zarathustra for agriculture and animals, I would delve into my tasks energised by societal reality. My tasks would be innumerable. I would have started straight away on forming communes in villages. How exciting, liberating and healthy would it have been to form a near ideal village commune! How creative and liberating would it have been to form and maintain a town commune or council! The consequences of forming an academy, cooperative or factory commune would have been endless! How pleasurable and honourable would it have been to form and contribute to a people's general democracy congress or assembly! It can be seen that just as there are no limits to hopes and aspirations, there are also no other limits to other than ourselves in turning these into reality. So long as we possess a little societal honour, a little bit of wisdom and love!”

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